"High Tech Ham Radio"

The AMRAD Newsletter

The Amateur Radio Research and Development Corporation

Volume XXI No. 4 July-August-September 1994

"Free Mail"

by Randy Mays, WA6VFC

You never know what you're going to find in PC Magazine, aside from all those little subscription cards that fall out. Awhile back I noticed a new product article about something called "Free Mail," a Windows-based electronic mail program that lets you set up your own e-mail and file transfer network. Having been a regular user of CompuServe and local computer bulletin board systems over the past few years, I'm always curious about any new or better way to send messages and files. I ordered the initial copy of "Free Mail" and, several versions later, now have a pretty decent e-mail system going with correspondents in exotic far flung locations like Pablo, Montana; Greenbrier, Tennessee; and Fresno, California. I thought regular AMRAD readers might be interested in how all this took place so here's the story of my ongoing adventures with "Free Mail."

First the Top Level stuff. "Free Mail" comes from Free Mail, Inc. This might seem like a very strange coincidence at first, but when you think about it, it starts to make sense. Free Mail is located in Bozeman and Missoula, Montana. The business office is in Bozeman and the programming goes on in Missoula. I've never been to Bozeman, but I have been to Butte and Missoula, and there doesn't seem to be a lot to do in Missoula so I guess that would be a great place to write code. There is a third site that you can reach through "Free Mail" called "Spline." I had a lot of trouble with this until I realized it may stand for "support line" since technical questions are often answered from the "Spline" site. I'm not sure of the exact location of "Spline," however in the visitors' center at the National Bison Range near Moise, Montana there is a locked door that is never opened. My theory is that "Spline" may be behind this door. By the way, my visit to Butte has nothing to do with this article. I just think the word Butte looks funny in print.

"Free Mail" does a lot of the things that other powerful e-mail programs do, but hides all of the technical goings on behind a very simple user interface, and simple terminology, and pretty good documentation. "Pretty good" means the manual and help files are excellent, but I found one spelling error on an error message and had to drop the overall rating.

The key to understanding "Free Mail" is to catch on to their use of non-computer terminology to describe what's happening. Back in the Dark Ages, at the Navy instructor school in San Diego, we were taught to start with something people already know and build on that. "Free Mail" does this by relating the functions of their e-mail software to the family. The basic product is a "Free Mail Parent." When you install a "Free Mail Parent" on a Windows machine, you can then create diskettes with a "Free Mail Child" program and distribute those diskettes to friends and family with whom you want to send mail and files. Those of you are are now saying to yourselves, "Ah, ha! It's a client-server deal" should stop that right now and continue reading. The trick with "Free Mail" is that there may indeed be a client-server or router or even the famous "@" character we've grown to know and admire, but to an unsophisticated WIndows user, "Free Mail" family oriented terminology makes it very easy to get people communicating. These are the same people whose eyes glaze over when techno-jargon like "client-server" enters the conversation.

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This is not, of course, an attack on the rampant and often uncontrolled use of techno-jargon in the rest of this newsletter. AMRAD's reputation as maybe the most elite group in ham radio and perhaps in the entire world is based on the judicious and sometimes very clever use of technical terms such as "orbit," "spectrum," "intermittent," ".40 S&W," and "floating ground." The term "packet," by the way, is no longer considered techno-jargon. "Packet" has become too mainstream for the AMRAD Newsletter.

(At this point the new AMRAD word processor detected the writer was drifting off the subject and administered a mild electric shock through the keyboard. The new word processor is designed to keep the writer focused. So far the biggest problem during testing has been battery drain. And now the article will resume...)

"Free Mail" parent software lets you set up a "star" network with the central parent supporting a number of remote users. When a diskette is made for a remote user, that diskette has the parent information on it, including the number to call. A "child" can send short messages (up to 400 characters) to another "child," but the primary applicaton of the basic package is to let one central computer exchange messages and files with remote users.

After using the basic parent-child setup for awhile, I realized that having to be at the central "parent" computer to pick up messages can be a problem. For too many of us today, mobility is both an interesting aspect of our jobs or lifestyle and a major inconvenience. The "Free Mail" product line has a solution to the problems associated with mobile e-mail retrieval. Again, they stay away from jargon, and this additional product is called the "Free Mail Parent Call Home" version. In other words, you upgrade the software (by sending money) and install a special "parent" on your mobile computer. Then you can be sitting in some fancy airline club at a major international airport (which, of course, I am doing as this is being written), call in to the "Free Mail" parent and retrieve messages. A password is involved so that others can't call in and do the same thing.

This may also be a good time to point out that messages and files may be "locked" (encrypted) within "Free Mail." As long as you and the recipient of a message know the right password, you can 'lock" a message so that it cannot be read by a third party. I have no idea what kind of encryption is being used by "Free Mail," but it does create some odd looking ciphertext.

With a regular "parent" and a "call home parent" you have a decent e-mail system that can support a mobile user. Just the basic "parent" would support a substantial travelling sales or service force talking to a central site. But once people get the hang of this e-mail stuff there will be one or two people who want to communicate with each other as they travel. This led to yet another variation of "Free Mail," which isn't cheap, but does provide a full-fledged e-mail system. This version is called "Extended Family."

I'm running an "Extended Family" version at my house right now on a second phone line. Friends and relatives in Montana, California, and Tennessee call in and leave mail for me, which I can pick up while travelling using the "call home" feature, or they can leave mail for each other.

So far I've just mentioned the basic setups (parent-child, child-child, call home, and extended family). There is another variation called parent-parent. A parent to parent network allows unlimited e-mail and file transfers between parent sites.

The first test of any good Windows program is the installation. In the '90s, I expect to be able to go to Windows, then "run" and then find something like "setup.exe" using "browse" and run it and have it install without putting any intellectual strain on me or anyone else who may be near the computer (as might happen if something didn't work and I started shouting and making gestures). I am pleased to report that "Free Mail" installs without confusion, shouting, or gestures. My all time favorite installation program is the one from Witchcraft in Louisville for the WInNET Internet e-mail program, but "Free Mail" comes very close.

Once the program is installed, you have to fill in some blanks with information that will be of critical importance later. Examples include a site name. This is very important. Your site name, and phone number, will be on all of the "child" diskettes you create and distribute. I put a lot of thought into a site name. The site name has the same potential visibility as an Internet domain name ("mtv.com" for example). After careful consideration, I named my site "Randy's House." Free Mail ignores the case of letters in the site name, and site names can be up to 20 characters long. Free Mail allows for all sort of variations in entering telephone numbers, both yours and numbers to be called. International prefixes are permitted. Commas for Hayes modem delays are permitted. You can even dial extensions after other numbers.

As I mentioned before, Free Mail is a very powerful program hidden behind a simple Windows interface. One of the options you can pick is called "logicAnswer." This lets you share the phone line to the Free Mail computer with an answering machine or fax modem. You can also restrict times when Free Mail will accept calls and information about the restricted times is sent to other sites. You can also poll other sites at specific times, with unique times for each site. You can route messages through other extended family parents. If I were smarter, I suspect I would appreciate the networking potential even more than I do now - and I'm already impressed with what little I do understand.

Free Mail has a feature called "Persistent Mail." This feature has four variations. You can set up canned messages that go to new callers, all callers, specific callers, or groups of callers. Sometimes I'll use this feature to let callers know my schedule. This lets some of the more computer aware callers know to send messages to "Randy's OmniBook 530" rather than "Randy's House." Even though I'll get the message either way, it does give this small group of users a thrill to know they are routing messages to a mobile user. I also use Persistent Mail to leave general messages to everyone, messages like "Have A Nice Day."

Lurking behind this "nice" Persistent Mail is yet another powerful computer capability. Persistent Mail can have files attached. If you have a file on your computer that lists the current catalog of your firm's products, and this file is updated by some other application, the latest version will always be sent as Persistent Mail. If this were not the AMRAD newsletter with its high standards for precise descriptive writing, I would be tempted to use the word "nifty" to describe the Persistent Mail capability within Free Mail.

Before finishing this article, I need to explain one of the reasons I like Free Mail: the user interface. It's simple. One of the problems with people who have technical rather than liberal arts educations is the technical people persist in putting in all sorts of features for no other reason than they thought of them in the first place. If one user interface is good, then adding another in the same program must be better, etc. With Free Mail, the user interface gives you icons for reading, writing, and sending files, and that's about it. I've given "child" diskettes to several people and all have been able to use the program the same day they installed it.

You can get more information by contacting Free Mail, Inc., 2504 Main Street, Suite K, Bozeman (not Butte!), Montana 59715. They can be reached at (406) 586-4200.

E-MAIL OR FREEMAIL?

A look at a software alternative to traditional electronic mail

Computers can help lawyers automate their communications through electronic mail. Transferring correspondence and files from one computer to another can save time and make it easy for several lawyers working as a litigation or project team to keep in touch. Electronic mail allows everyone on the team to communicate with each other from any place that can be hooked up with a computer and modem.

Many lawyers believe that electronic mail requires the installation of a complicated office network or use of a subscription online service—but this is no longer true. One problem with an office network is that a network administrator may be needed just to figure out how to use the program and, if you run into trouble, your electronic mail could be down for hours. Online services do handle electronic mail, but normally there is a subscription fee, which can add up quickly when all team members use the service.

FreeMail Alternative

FreeMail is an alternative that makes having an online information center easy and economical. The makers of FreeMail call it the "self-replicating E-mail and file transfer system for everybody." This product allows stand-alone PCs to exchange electronic mail and files easily by using regular phone lines and standard modems. Connecting to a network is unnecessary because, with FreeMail, you create your own off-line network. Essentially, FreeMail is automated communications software that makes connecting to and communicating with your group easy.

FreeMail purchasers receive a "parent" version of the program. This is simply the main program, which operates like a main office. Using the program, you can create "child" versions of the program to give to group members. There is no extra charge for the child programs you create and give away. The child programs are fully functional versions of the FreeMail program but are pre-programmed to link to the parent. Group members will only need Windows and a modem, and by using their own FreeMail child program, all group members can communicate with the parent user easily.

One of the best reasons to use FreeMail is that it is a low-cost program that enables you to create an unlimited number of child diskettes without charge.

Installing the program is a snap. You must have Windows and a modem connected to your computer and an outside phone line. Simply run the setup program that is shipped on the program disk, and FreeMail installs itself. You don't have to configure anything. FreeMail can even automatically detect your modem. Once the program is installed, double-click on the program icon to run FreeMail.

The first time you use the program, enter the name of your site—for example, "Law Office of John Smith"—and the phone number to which your modem is connected. After that, using FreeMail is simple. The program has a command bar with buttons for the most common functions of the program: New Mail, Read, Write, Files, Call Now, Wait, and a button for creating child diskettes, called Free Child. Also, by using the keyboard and mouse, you can utilize the standard Windows menu to select functions that the button bar handles, as well as additional functions not located on the button bar.

The program has a phone book in which you make entries for each FreeMail site. To function, each site will need a FreeMail program as well; however, you need only create a child version of the program using the parent version.

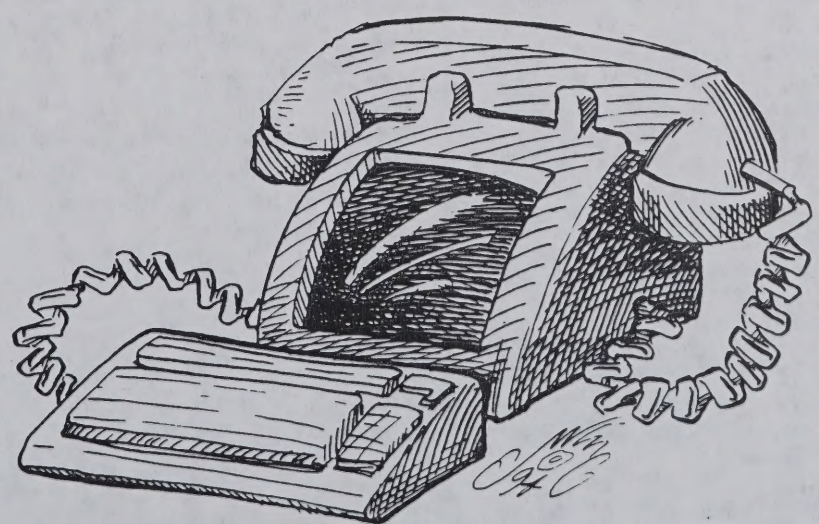
To create a child copy of FreeMail, click on the Free Child button, and make sure there is a clean, formatted diskette with a minimum of 1.2 MB in the disk drive. The program then will copy the FreeMail program to the child disk, including the setup and help files, and will imbed the parent information from the disk into the program. Then, apply one of the diskette labels that come with the program and give the disk to the friends, clients, or colleagues who will be contacting you. When that person installs and runs the child program, he or she can create e-mail or designate files to send to you. Completing the task is as simple as clicking on a button: the program will automatically dial the parent, transfer information to the parent, receive information that may be waiting from the parent, and then disconnect.

Extended Family

An advanced version of the program, called FreeMail Extended Family, allows FreeMail child sites to communicate with each other through a central parent. It does this by enabling the parent to become an e-mail router, collecting and distributing messages between the child sites.

The Extended Family version is best for any office that needs to maintain e-mail contact among all of its members as opposed to the members communicating just with the parent. To use the Extended Family version, run it on a single, dedicated computer—used only for FreeMail—and use a 386 processor at minimum.

There is also a version of FreeMail with a Call Home feature that allows a user to gain access to the FreeMail parent site from a



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By Philip H. Weber

remote computer. The remote can be used to call in and pick up new and unread messages and files that have been sent by other FreeMail sites. The Call Home version is designed to be installed on more than one computer, such as an office computer and a laptop.

FreeMail takes advantage of many features that Windows offers. For example, if you want to create e-mail in your own Windows word processor instead of from within FreeMail, copy the text from the word processor to the FreeMail program. You can also send your Windows word processor file from within FreeMail.

When you receive files from other sites, you can automatically launch that file's application just by clicking on the file name with the right mouse button. For example, if you receive a Word for Windows *.doc file, Word for Windows can be launched just by clicking on the *.doc file name in FreeMail's Received Mail window.

FreeMail has many other great features. It lets you encrypt e-mail files so that they can only be decrypted by someone who knows the password. FreeMail also has a Custom Cabinet feature that allows easy management of incoming files and electronic mail. Simply drag and drop the file name from the file list to the Custom Cabinet icon shown on the screen. When you drag a file to the Custom Cabinet, select a subject drawer, or create one, to store the file.

Any FreeMail site or group of sites can be called automatically at set times during the day or week through a process called "polling." This enables the parent site to exchange messages with the child sites automatically.

FreeMail will even share a phone line with an answering or fax machine. It has a "logicAnswer" feature that allows FreeMail to determine whether an incoming call is from another FreeMail site.

According to its maker, FreeMail is used in professional offices in place of overnight shipping. Instead of sending paper documents back and forth, FreeMail is being used to send document files. Other offices use FreeMail instead of subscription e-mail services such as Compuserve or MCI Mail. Still others use FreeMail for development projects where people must send files back and forth quickly and efficiently. Even software companies (such as FreeMail, Inc.) are using FreeMail for customer service and support, giving copies of FreeMail "children" to all their clients.

Running any version of FreeMail requires a PC with at least a 386 processor, MS-DOS 3.3 or later operating system, Microsoft Windows 3.1 or later, a hard disk with at least 2 MB of free space, a modem that recognizes the standard AT (Hayes) command set, a 3.5 inch 1.44 MB floppy drive, and a mouse.

To find out more about FreeMail, contact FreeMail, Inc. in Bozeman, Montana at (406) 586-4200. ◆

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